



The Haunting Specter of Hindu Ethnonationalist-Neocolonial Development in the Indian Occupied Kashmir

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Abstract

The Indian government says that the removal of Kashmir's autonomy is for development, but it should be seen as embedded in a structure of neocolonialism based on fundamentalist Hindu ethnonationalism or Hindutva and fueled by neoliberalism in which even Muslims living in India are cast as invaders and foreigners. Kashmiri, doubly marked as the Other: first as Muslims and second as seekers of self-determination, fear their loss of territorial sovereignty will pave way for settler colonialism, dispossession of indigenous people and rampant exploitation of resources resulting in neocolonial maldevelopment.

Keywords Neocolonialism · Kashmir · Indian occupation · Maldevelopment · Indus Water Treaty · Settler colonialism · Power development

August 2019: The Siege of Kashmir

Between August and October 2019 the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) in the Indian administered Kashmir or the Kashmir Valley for short, gave clearances to 198 projects that involved diversion of forest land. The projects approved felling of trees for power projects, building roads and for use by the Indian military and paramilitary force. These projects had not received clearance for years 'because there were questions from the FAC. Those questions had still not been answered. But the clearances were given in a hasty manner' (Athar 2019). The timing of approving these projects is crucial. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government was ruling the region directly through a nominated official called the Governor. The local elected government had been dismissed in 2018. In addition, on August 5th 2019 the Indian government had erased Kashmir's autonomous status and territorial sovereignty which were promised under Articles 370 & 35-A of the Indian constitution. Not only was the autonomy removed militarily, Kashmir was demoted from a state into a Union territory and bifurcated. As a Union Territory with limited legislature, Kashmir would be controlled directly by the Indian government.¹ All

this was done without consulting the Kashmiri legislature and its people, not to mention that it is an unconstitutional, deceitful, and undemocratic process (Akshay 2019). The Indian government claim that the removal of autonomy is for the sole reason of 'vikas' (development) and curbing nepotism and 'terrorism'. Kashmiri people see the revocation as an attack on their ethnic, religious, and national identity but the Indian government patronizingly claims that it is for their own good. Kashmiris fear their loss of territorial sovereignty will pave way for settler colonialism, dispossession of indigenous people, and rampant exploitation of resources.

On the FAC decision an expert stated: 'Diversion of forest land without the consent of local communities and gram sabhas cause violation of their forest rights. This move comes at a time when there is a larger concern among the local communities over withdrawal of the constitutional protection of democratic rights including special protection to their land rights' (Ishan 2019). The removal of Kashmir's autonomy cannot be seen through the simple lens of India as a sovereign nation seeking the full integration of a rebellious region. It should be seen in context of being embedded in a structure of neocolonialism based on fundamentalist Hindu ethnonationalism or Hindutva and fueled by neoliberalism. Hindutva

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¹ See the following reports: Women's voice; Fact-finding report on Kashmir. 24 September 2019. <http://en.maktoobmedia.com/2019/09/24/full-text-womens-voice-fact-finding-report-on-kashmir/>. Accessed 5 December 2019; Kashmir Civil Disobedience: A Citizen's Report by Anirudh Kala, Brinelle D'Souza, Revati Laul & Shabnam Hashmi 2 October 2019. <https://kashmirscholars.files>



as an ideology is a melding of Hindu fascism and Hindu fundamentalism; a religio-political militant nationalism which aims to establish Ram Rajiya (Kingdom of the Hindu God Ram) under the banner of 'One Nation, One Culture, One Religion, and One Language' (Frykenberg 2008). In a broader neocolonial context, the erasure of Kashmir's autonomy is the fruition of the ideology Hindu indigeneity in which Muslims living in India, are cast as invaders and foreigners. In this equation, Kashmiri Muslims are doubly marked as the Other: first as Muslims and second as Kashmiris who are ungovernable, and committed to an irrepressible struggle for plebiscite and sovereignty (Zia 2018). Pivotal to this policy is the military annexation of Kashmir in August to remove its autonomy which was premised on the bogey of Islamic terrorism mixed with 'Pakistan's proxy war' wherein the ideology of neoliberal development of the region was cast as a prescription.

On 5 August when the government of India announced the removal of autonomy, more than 48,000 extra troops had laid a siege, on top of the 700,000 plus forces already present in the region, Kashmir was put under curfew and complete information blackout for over 4 months. Towards October even though the ban on some cellphone services and landlines was lifted, Internet and partial restrictions on mobility continued. A large number of Kashmiri resistance leaders, civil society activists, even India's own collaborators, and client politicians have been put under arrest. Mass arrests were rampant, and at one time more than 13,000 young boys had been detained and many imprisoned in jails outside Kashmir. Kashmiri journalists were barred from reporting. Foreign reporters did cover the situation initially but were later stopped from going into the region. The trickle of news reports that initially surfaced in the international media reflected a fearful population, yet resistant to the removal of autonomy. The Indian government continuously projected that the situation on the ground was normal. At the time of writing this article, the siege on Kashmir has crossed the 130th-day and is unfolding as a humanitarian crisis. The lack of communication exacerbated the scarcity of essential supplies, medicines, and healthcare. Kashmir has suffered \$2.4 billion worth of economic loss.²

Footnote 1 (continued)

.wordpress.com/2019/10/kashmir-civil-disobedience-a-citizens-report.pdf. Accessed 5 December 2019; Kashmir Caged: A Fact-Finding Report by Jean Drèze, Kavita Krishnan, Maimoona Mollah and Vimal Bhai. 14 August 2019. <https://www.nchro.org/index.php/2019/08/14/kashmir-caged-a-fact-finding-report-by-jean-dreze-kavita-krishnan-maimoona-mollah-and-vimal-bhai/>. Accessed 5 December 2019; Let Kashmir Speak: Amnesty International. 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/let-kashmir-speak/>. Accessed 5 December 2019.

² Kashmir sees over \$2.4 billion losses since Article 370 was amended. The Business Standard. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IN/DevelopmentsInKashmirJune2016ToApril2018.pdf>. Accessed 18 December 2019.

The curfews and lockdown imposed by India is not a new phenomenon in Kashmir which is known as the world's largest open-air prison and is one of the highest militarized zones (Duschinski et al. 2018). In 1989, a popular armed movement started in Kashmir against the Indian government demanded right to self-determination and plebiscite as promised by the UN. The Indian government imposed the Armed Forces Special Forces Act (AFSPA) which gives the Indian military and paramilitary forces unlimited powers to act with impunity. AFSPA is based on the colonial constitutionalism that India inherited after its independence from British imperial rule (Baruah 2010). Gross human rights violations affected by the government forces include the killing of more than 70,000, and plus 10,000 enforced disappearances; rape used a weapon of war, mass incarcerations, and injuries like the world's first mass blindings (OCHCR 2018; Zia 2019a).

The Indian government is arguing that the special status has only 'damaged' Kashmir. Even though India's own analysts have shown that the development indices for Kashmir are already high or reflect a marked improvement in comparison to some of India's states (Rajalakshmi 2019). The Indian government arguments about the removal of Article 370 will establish corruption-free governance and a host of fundamental rights such as the right to education, minimum wages, minority act, and social reservation in Kashmir have been contested as misleading, disingenuous, and false (Zia 2019b). Thus, it is reasonable to ask why Kashmiris are caged indoors rather than being allowed to celebrate on the streets if this decision is about Kashmir's development. The BJP across India runs on an anti-minority agenda and the erasure of Kashmir's autonomy and diluting its Muslim majority nature by way of settler colonialism has been one BJP's rallying cries. The final integration of Kashmir with India has hyper-religious and nationalistic roots entrenched in Hindu supremacy (Mohammad 2019; Kanjwal 2019). A wide range of opinions reveals that the core reason of removing Kashmir's autonomy is ethnonationalism focused on making India a new imperial Hindu power in the sub-continent, which is bolstered by the intensifying neoliberal policy (Dibyesh 2019; Gettleman et al. 2019; Gudavarthy 2019). The BJP has activated an agenda of corporatizing and linking nationalism to the economy manifested in the slogan 'One Nation, One Market' Thus, the mix of neo-liberalism and Hindutva, is out in the service of building the Hindu 'rashtra' [nation] (Teltumbde 2017). The BJP's Hindutva politics in India is an amalgam of nationalism, neoliberalism, and postcolonialism which manifests as a form of 'postcolonial neoliberal nationalism' governmentality (Kaul 2019: 3)

In 1991, under an officially secular party's government India promulgated its National Economic Policy, a neoliberal vision which set the country on the path to becoming a neo-imperial power. Kashmir's abundant natural resources



especially strategically flowing waters plus mineral, agricultural, and tourism potential are crucial to that project. The prevailing Hindu version of manifest destiny uses the facade of neoliberal development as a means for the region's emancipation and deliverance, thus subsuming the genuine demand of the Kashmiri people for self-determination under UN resolutions. It is notable that the world, has for all practical purposes, acquiesced with Kashmir's fate by accepting the red-herring argument of neoliberal development uncritically—without giving due consideration to the region's political history, its disputed status, people's resistance and its precarious climes that are on the brink of environmental disaster exacerbated by military-industrial complex.³ What Kashmir will contend within the coming years is not development but neocolonial maldevelopment. A Kashmiri reflects on the Indian policy in this way: 'They [Indian government] are opening Kashmir for business without our consent. It is our blood and sweat and they are completely annihilating our land and identity'.

Losing Autonomy and the Threat of Settler Colonialism

In 1947 Kashmir was a princely state with a Muslim majority population that was ruled by an unpopular Hindu monarch. At the time of the partition of British India and the formation of India and Pakistan, the dominant sentiment amongst Kashmiris was for independence (Schofield 1996, 2004; Whitehead 2008). The British partition plan only allowed the option of India or Pakistan, whose competing claims on the region ended in a war. The UN arbitration resulted in a ceasefire and bifurcation of the region (into Pakistan and Indian Administered Kashmir) until a plebiscite was held. Instead the two countries went into competing claims with India actively pursuing aggressive integrationist policies. Faced with the deep-rooted nationalism of the Kashmiri masses, Indian leaders engineered an arrangement with a section of Kashmiri client politicians giving quasi-autonomy to the territory under their control. The final resolution was still conditional and to be decided under the UN-mandated plebiscite. Most Kashmiris saw the special status as a weak and unjust replacement for the plebiscite and one of the first sly moves by India to usurp the territory. Over the years the Indian government eroded Kashmir's autonomy to the extent that it existed only as a symbol except for the Article 35A which protected Kashmir territorial sovereignty. Known as

the state subject law that existed since the monarchical rule, its continuity was a core condition in Kashmir's relation to India. For Kashmiris this law meant at least their indigenous rights and resources would be relatively protected. In the 72 years India has employed its executive, judicial, and legislative powers to eviscerate Kashmir's autonomy in order to engineer a full integration down the road and clearly having no intention to hold the plebiscite. This led to the armed uprising in 1989.

The fear of settler colonialism in Kashmir has been on the rise which manifested in the 2008 event of a 'land grab' and what a Kashmiri political analyst has called 'demographic terrorism' (Hussain n.d.) That year, the Kashmir government agreed to transfer 40 hectares of forestland to the Amarnath shrine, a Hindu pilgrimage site in the Himalayas. The proposal included setting up permanent housing facilities (Kak 2010). Kashmiris took to streets fearing the establishment of separate settlements triggering a new phase of Kashmiri grassroots resistance movement that has been termed as the Kashmiri Intifada. The resistance leaders called the move 'establishing a state within a state'. Parallels were drawn with the Israel Land Authority's new constructions in Har Homa, East Jerusalem in 2005. Hindu fundamentalist parties including the Rashtriya Swayam Seva Sangh (RSS) have to continued to fan nationalistic flames, persistently infusing politics with religion. The RSS is the ideologue of the BJP and it was founded on ideals of Hindu supremacy; and draws from Fascist and Nazi ideology. In the last decade Hindu pilgrims are increasingly mobilized to visit Hindu holy sites in Kashmir more as a patriotic duty than spiritual salvation. In 1963, about 4000 pilgrims visited Amarnath; in 2015, the number has grown to about 200,000 (Zia 2020).

The removal of autonomy came as a shock to Kashmiris because in 2015, the Kashmiri High Court had passed a historic judgment stating that Article 370 was 'permanent'. Indian jurists and constitutional experts believed that Kashmir's autonomy was an article of faith protected by laws and also that the assembly required to remove it did not exist anymore, making its removal impossible. In 2015, the RSS backed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court seeking to repeal Article 35A of the Indian constitution. This brought the fight over special status on the forefront in the last few years, and all eyes were trained on the judiciary. But given their current domination of parliamentary and regional politics in India, the BJP government went ahead de-operationalized Article 370 which officially ended Kashmir's autonomy. Going forth, Kashmir will no longer have a separate constitution but will have to abide by the Indian constitution much like other Indian states. It will be under direct Indian rule and non-Kashmiris will be able to buy the property and have the right to franchise. The threat of settler colonialism has never been far but now Kashmiris see the pathways fully opened.

³ Kanth and Ghosh (2015); Amarnath Yatra: A militarized pilgrimage. Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society. 2017. <https://jkccs.wordpress.com/2017/05/05/amarnath-yatra-a-militarize-d-pilgrimage/>. Accessed 2 December 2019.



The Specter of Neoliberal-Hindutva

In 1991 India formally adopted the New Economic Policy (NEP) which has been described as representing ‘the demands of the capitalist class, and more specifically, the demands of hegemonic fractions of the domestic and foreign-diasporic capitalist class at a particular stage in the development of Indian and global capitalism’ (Raju 2015: 756). NEP was implemented after India faced an economic crisis due to external debt. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund helped India to the tune of 7 billion dollars conditional to liberalization and opening the economy.

Around this period in 1990 BJP organized a *Rath Yatra*, or a chariot journey across India. Notably, the armed struggle had just broken out in Kashmir in 1989. The rath yatra was a spectacle of the coming of age of Hindu supremacist forces who had doggedly worked since the early nineteenth century to coalesce India into a Hindu nation. Ironically they had not taken part in the fight against the British rule. The yatra marked a historic milestone in the Indian politics, signaling the country’s final descent into communal politics that would stop at nothing but establishing a Hindu supremacist state. The yatra left communal violence in its wake with targeted mob violence on Muslim neighborhoods and increased BJP’s vote share especially in the constituencies through which it passed (Blakeslee 2014). The chariot at the center of the march which the BJP leaders rode was telling in its embedded symbolism. It was a mini-bus designed to look like a traditional chariot. If the mini-bus as a modern contraption was the force of neoliberalism; the ritualistic and religious face was provided by the Hindu ethnonationalism—both hand in glove carrying forward the agenda of India as a neocolonial power. Inherent to this nexus is the contradiction of Hindutva, which is a harkening back to a xenophobic Hindu purity working in tandem with the modern neoliberal global market forces. If Muslim neighborhoods were the target in 1990; it was an outright military re-annexation of Kashmir in 2019 and which in any case has been a target of direct and indirect violence of the Indian state for 72 years.

The race to establish India as a full-fledged Hindu state came to fruition in 2014 when Narendra Modi won the elections. In 2019 Indians re-elected Modi to power with a resounding majority, handing him both houses of the Parliament; thus pitting firmly in place the flag of majoritarian anti-minority and anti-Muslim politics. Even though BJP had always called for abrogation of Kashmir’s special status, all Indian government’s right from 1947 have steadily pursued policies of eroding Kashmir’s autonomy and forcing open its resources and economy. Thus, the Modi government disregard for India’s own constitutional mechanisms and the

protections for indigenous people’s rights is nothing new for Kashmiris. Only his approach and method has been more blatant and aggressive. It has been the ultimate spectacle of military might, and outrightly unconstitutional decisions, to strike terror into the hearts of Kashmiris. In India, there is across the board consensus for the removal of Kashmir’s autonomy from political parties that otherwise oppose Modi and their disagreement exists only on the method employed. Thus, the overall Indian policy is focused on the project of forcible occupation and integration of Kashmir through any means possible. Many analysts conclude that with the non-consensual and undemocratic ripping of Kashmir’s autonomy article, India’s de facto occupation of Kashmir has become de jure.

Moreover, the dilution of the Muslim-majority demography of Kashmir is key to understanding the erasure of Kashmir’s autonomy. The ideology growing insidiously in India pivots around a primal Hindu indigeneity in which Muslims, with an ahistoric brazenness, are cast as invaders and foreigners. Kashmiri Muslims have been cast as the ‘Other’ who are easily ‘killable’ bodies along with the Indian Muslims and other marginalized communities (Zia 2018). This predicament is unfolding as India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) recently. With Kashmir’s autonomous status gone, all Indian laws are automatically applicable to the region. The CAA in tandem with nationwide National Register of Citizens, which is being applied all over India, is a set laws that will be first and foremost discriminatory to Muslims. These laws have been compared to the Nuremberg laws that laid the foundations that eventually led to the Jewish Holocaust. In context of rising Islamophobia and institutionalization of discrimination against Muslims in India, Kashmir was the first in line, being a constant thorn in India’s side since 1947 as a dominantly Muslim state which unceasingly demanded democratic sovereignty and plebiscite under UN resolutions.

The Neocolonial Development

Before becoming the prime minister, Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat and the development of that state is credited to him. He is projected as the ‘development man’ committed to minimum government and maximum governance. On the other hand, one of the most notorious nicknames he has received is the Butcher of Gujarat—when under his watch more than 2000 Muslims were massacred in a communal pogrom (Ayyub 2016).⁴ Modi is the only

⁴ Report on Godhra Riots. Concerned Citizens Tribunal – Gujarat 2002. An Inquiry into the Carnage. India: Sabrang. <https://www.sabrang.com/tribunal/>. Accessed 12 October 2019.



political figure who has been banned from traveling to the United States of America under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), a provision of US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). In Gujarat, Modi attracted corporations and big business with tax breaks, cheap land, and ready infrastructural facilities. He has deep allegiance of leading Indian corporate houses and tycoons both residing in India and abroad that openly supported his reelection. In 2018 it was reported that nearly 8 billion dollars were spent on Indian general elections. Nearly half of the expenditure was done by BJP (Tanwar 2019) with nearly 43% percent of the campaign funds coming from unknown sources.⁵

The ease with which most world powers have accepted India's crack down on Kashmir and the basic human rights of Kashmiris and buying the argument of neoliberal development raises questions about the nature of global politics and which no doubt itself pivots around neoliberal and neo-imperialistic ideals. The kind of development being propagated in Kashmir comes at the cost of dispossession of populations, overexploitation of nature, and is an inherently violent mechanism to control regions and peoples (Escobar 1995). The development that India is enforcing in Kashmir to access resources for multinational and national corporations is based on patriarchal model of development propped by the military-industrial complex. Ironically, India is also offering development as a corrective to solve the political dispute and suppress the genuine demands for self-determination by the Kashmiri people. Thus, projecting the Kashmir issue as a mere internal law and order problem that would be solved by infrastructural development, jobs, and other economic opportunities. The irony of the internal contradictions in the Indian government's arguments becomes palpable when it claims that the communication lockdown in the region is preventing killings; the killings which occur when the government's own forces use indiscriminate and disproportionate force to quell protests [where protestors at the most might carry stones]. Thus, stepping up state terrorism in the form of collective punishment since August 2019 and still ongoing 4 months later, which is leading to more human rights violations, is an anecdote of the human rights violations caused routinely by the Indian state itself in the name of state security. Even though India has been admonished by the global powers to ease restrictions, the denouncements have not been strong enough to make any effective change on ground (Güldoğan 2019).

The New East India Company

As soon as autonomy was removed the next day media reported that the Indian government was trying to kick-start corporate investment and infrastructure development in Kashmir. The government of India began speeding up hydropower projects of strategic importance in Kashmir. The Indus river system is the most important resource in the Kashmir region which is managed by the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan (Dar 2011–2012). According to the IWT, India has exclusive rights over all the waters of the eastern rivers and its tributaries, while Pakistan has control over the use of waters flowing westward. Despite having abundant water resources, there is a chronic power scarcity in Kashmir.⁶ In the past, the local governments in Kashmir had allowed the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) of India to develop power projects. Dubbed the New East India Company, Kashmiris opined that the NHPC exploited their resources with little benefit to them. In her extensive research on dams in Kashmir, anthropologist Bhan (2014) contends that the Indian hegemony on Kashmir's critical water resources should be seen as part of India's ongoing counterinsurgency war against Kashmiris, and its illegitimate and extensive military control. Thus, the Indian colonial occupation of Kashmir is hungry for resources and its hallmark is overexploitation and sitting atop massive land reserves. Kashmiri activists for years have protested for the return of all or some power projects. The NHPC hegemony over the region's waters is challenged as fraud and illegal occupation of land and resources of the state and is seen as a corporate arm of India's occupation (Chatterji et al. 2009). It is telling that after revoking autonomy that along with political figures, and human rights activists, the government of India has arrested civil society activists who have been actively fighting for indigenous control over Kashmir's natural resources.

Not only power projects, but after removing Kashmir's autonomy, the government of India has given also a boost to road connectivity programmes on the pretext that focus on roads and infrastructure has been lagging. Agencies that build, operate, maintain, and upgrade India's national highways and strategic roads, including roads that share international boundaries with neighboring countries, have sprung into action. Their work is seen as ushering strategic and socio-cultural integration in remote areas in Kashmir. Another project that the government has put into action is setting up land banks to attract investment and industries (Economic Times 2019). Besides Indian corporation and

⁵ Is BJP riding the Modi wave or Money wave. 2019. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/politics/bjp-modi-political-funding-money>. Accessed 18 December 2019.

⁶ Bashir Arif. Powerless Kashmir wants control over NHPC power projects. N.d. (<https://currentnews.in/powerless-kashmir-wants-control-over-nhpc-power-projects/>). Accessed 2 December 2019.



business tycoons promising support to the government, experts opine that these development initiatives will receive also the support of global lending agencies (Shreya 2019). However, given the longstanding resistance of the Kashmiri people which the Indian government attempts to repress by disproportionate force causing human rights abuses, and severe restrictions on communication and mobility which hinder routine life as well as trade it remains to be seen how the development policy will unfold.

The Indian government says that full integration of Kashmir, even if against the wishes of its people is what's best for them. This is as imperialistic as it can get. The stereotype of a development-fixated-large democracy with a vast market enables India to make invisible its military occupation inside Kashmir. It also gets away with the terrorism that Hindu supremacists have unleashed on Muslims not only in Kashmir but across India and also Dalit and other marginalized communities.

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